

The Potter and the Clay

by T. Austin-Sparks

Reading: Jer. 18:1-6.

"He was making a work on the wheels."

This little parable issuing in its message, has bound up with it some of the foundation truths which run throughout the Word of God and which are the laws which govern all God's activities in relation to man. Although they are very simple and elementary, we might do well to look at them again briefly and concisely.

God's Desire to Express Himself

The first thing that is clearly set forth here is the fact that God desires to express Himself, and, when you think about it, that is found everywhere in the Word of God and outside of the Word of God — God's desire to express Himself, for we must conclude that, in the case of God as a potter, He does not just shape things willy-nilly without any thought, concern or care. He does not just throw a mass of clay upon the wheel and begin to manipulate it and see what will come out. We must conclude that, before ever the clay comes to hand, the finished vessel is in the mind of the Potter, and that that vessel, as a finished thing, answers to something very deeply in His heart. It is really a part of Himself, and is the expression of Himself, His mind, His heart, His will, and God has ever been actuated in His undertakings by the desire to have something which will be the expression of Himself.

The whole created universe came from the hand of God with that object in view. When God undertook creation, it was for no less a purpose than to put Himself into expression, that by His own works He should be known. The apostle Paul makes that statement quite positively in his letter to the Romans — *"The invisible things of Him ... are ... seen ... through the things that are made, his everlasting power and divinity"* (Rom. 1:20). It is God in what He is, symbolized, represented and expressed in visible form. And if man has one explanation, it is that, and that is proved by the fact that the Man, God's great representative Man, who is according to His own heart and satisfies Him, is, as the apostle says elsewhere, *"the very image of his substance, the effulgence of His glory"* (Heb. 1:3). The Lord Jesus is God manifest in the flesh.

So you may see everywhere this great fact set forth in the Word of God. God has, from eternity, desired to put Himself into expression in a manifest, visible form and that lies at the heart of this parable — the potter and his vessel; the Potter in the very substance and form of His vessel, that, when you see the vessel perfected, you see God, the mind of God; you see what God is like morally.

That surely carries us on beyond the created universe around us, beyond Israel as an elect nation, to the church and to the individual believer's life — God making a work upon the wheels. And you ask, 'What is God making? What is He determined to make?', and the answer is, He is making that which will answer His own desire for self-expression, and in the end when God's work is done, His universe will have nothing in it but the expression of God. We have to come back to that and stress that all the way through our meditation, but let us see where things begin. Of course, there is a very great deal more than I have said in that first principle, and it could hold us for quite a long time — God's desire to express Himself. Behind everything that God has set His heart upon and is doing is this desire of His heart to bring Himself into expression, to have a vessel which is the revelation of Himself.

God's Sovereign Rights in His Own

Now, we must get inside that grand circle and see the next thing which arises here — that is, God's sovereign rights in His own. That carries with it this, that God can never make a start upon His purpose, He can never take the first step in that great desire of His to express Himself until He gets the material into His hands. He must be able to say of those concerned, 'This is Mine', and of course, that can only be now on the grounds of His rights in redemption. God is not acting merely upon His rights in creation now. He has His rights in creation, but they will work out very largely in judgment because the creation as such does not acknowledge God's rights, and does not give Him His rights. Nevertheless, He claims those rights and will assert them in judgment eventually, but in this work of satisfying His own heart in His creation, it can only be on the ground of His rights in redemption as ceded to Him; that is, we have to come to the place where we acknowledge what the Word says — "*Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price*" (1 Cor. 6:19,20). You belong to the Lord. Now, there can be nothing whatever of God's divine purpose realised until that position is secured, that, on the ground of the great redemption which is in Christ Jesus, we become the Lord's, His property, and accord Him His rights in our being, His sovereign rights in redemption.

"*O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter?*" (Jer. 18:6). That is only saying, in other words, 'Have not I the right to do as I like with My own? And that is a challenge. 'Do you, O house of Israel, acknowledge Me as your Lord, your God, your Jehovah?' and that challenge, of course, comes to us. If we acknowledge the Lord as our Lord, then that carries with it His absolute right to do what He wants with us — God's sovereign rights with His own. Very often, there is a controversy with the Lord on that very thing. We do not get over all our difficulties easily on that matter. When the Lord takes up His work and we are not able to see His end and we are called upon to repose implicit faith in Him when it would appear that, rather than make something which is the expression of His own divine nature, every other kind of nature but the divine is coming out, we revolt. When we feel the pressure of His hand, the discipline, the chastening, the breaking, the softening, sometimes the crushing and all that is bound up with the realisation of His end in us, we do not easily acquiesce in the sovereignty of God. Sometimes it is difficult, but it is a position of peace, of rest of heart, and of spiritual strength when we are able, either as a whole or on any given question or matter, to really say, 'It is the Lord, let Him do as seems good to Him.' That is, when we are able, by the grace of God, to say, 'The Lord has a right to do what He likes and I do not challenge those rights.' That is necessary to God if He is going on with His work to secure His end.

But then, you see, that means such an utter position. In the clay represented in this parable, there was evidently something that rose up, that rebelled, that defied Him, that resisted Him, that had a mind of its own, a way of its own, a will of its own, an interest of its own, a desire of its own, something which, being of itself, was not in accordance with the thought of the Potter — and it was marred in the hand of the Potter. What is called for, if God is going to pursue His work to His full end of glory and self-expression, is the utter position of unreserved acquiescence. God requires that — a yieldedness, a surrender; no argument, no controversy, no rebellion, but a perfect response to the Lord in the most complete surrender to His hand. That is the divine requirement if the thought of God from all eternity in us, concerning us, is to mature and have its full expression. He is to be the Master in every part of our being, and we have to have nothing in heart or mind or will that is contrary to His own.

That is a law written here so distinctly and written through history — God setting out to do a great and a glorious thing in a life or in a people or in a creation, and then something rising up contrary to God, other than God, and presenting God with difficulties, making it necessary for the Lord to say, 'I cannot go on with what I intended. I cannot do what I meant to do.' Yes, it is a remarkable thing, but it is quite true that even God Almighty, for the realisation of His end, requires our acquiescence and our full

acquiescence. He is not going beyond the point where we comply with His will. In this way we can set back the purpose of God in our lives; we can arrest the hand of God; we can defeat the divine intention. It is a solemn thought, but it is true. So the Lord calls to us for this yieldedness to Himself in implicit faith where we find difficulty in understanding what He is doing. Well, that is remarkable, but these are the simple laws of divine purpose in any life.

God's First or Second Best?

Then, out of that, issues this. We can miss God's first best and only have His second best. *"The vessel that he made ... was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it another vessel."* I wonder what that meant in the case of Israel? I wonder if that is not explained in the words of the Lord Jesus to Israel many years after this, when He said, *"Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof"* (Matt. 21:43). And Peter, still many years later than that, said of the church, *"Ye are an elect race, a holy nation"* (1 Pet. 2:9). I wonder, then, if Israel lost that high purpose of God which the church has come into? It is a thought. A heavenly thing — for you remember God showed Abraham his seed not only as the sand of the seashore, but as the stars of heaven, but undoubtedly Israel has lost the heavenly side. If Israel is recovered, as prophecy would seem to indicate, it will only be the earthly thing. The church has the heavenly side. Israel has God's second best. The turning-point was here in prophecy, and actually in the days when the Lord Jesus came. Yes, it is possible to miss God's first best and only have His second best. Are you going to be content with that? Some of us know many who have made that choice, who have missed what we knew was God's purpose for their lives, and they knew, but, for some mess of pottage, for some temporal interest, because of some earthly relationship or because of the difficulty of the way, they accepted something less. They went to something else. They let go the heavenly vision. We know that, so far as God's first thought is concerned, it is no longer possible for them — and they know it too. That heaven is closed to them.

Talking to a young man in Glasgow recently, telling me about his school life, he said this, "Well, the thing that mattered to me while I was there was not so much that I should excel either in my academic life nor in sports. The thing which concerned me was that in my life I should come to God's first best." That is where he is and that is where he was, even at school. You say that that is unusual. Yes, but God's seal is on that life, and such a declaration is a challenge to us all.

God presents to us His first best, but it is the way of the potter's wheel, and that is not always an easy and comfortable way. There is a good deal of letting go to be done, a good deal of yielding to be made, a good deal of compliance with a will not our own — 'that higher will'. There is a lot of that. We can, by refusing, by not acquiescing, shall I say it positively — by not setting our hearts wholly upon God's first best, miss it, and be one of those who, in the end, have only got God's second best.

I remember someone telling me, years ago, a dream they had had. In their dream they saw a number of crosses, and they were all different sizes. There was a small cross, and a large cross and a larger and a larger, until there was a very large cross. And they were asked to choose their cross. They looked at those crosses, and chose — not the smallest, that was too mean, but also not the largest, that was too big — they chose an intermediate cross. Then they said that in their dream they were transported to heaven and in heaven they saw a number of crowns, and they also varied in size and glory. There was a small one, and a large one and a larger and a larger, and each crown corresponded to the cross in glory, in magnificence, and an intermediate crown was brought, but the Lord said, 'My child, that was the crown that I intended for you, but you chose something that did not correspond with it, a smaller cross than that crown warranted.' That is a dream, but it has its message.

The way of God's first best is a hard way, a difficult way, a costly way. We can have a lesser way, but oh! then there is the glory. Listen again to the apostle — *"This one thing I do ... I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ"* (Phil. 3:14). No one can say that that attitude of the apostle Paul was necessary in order to get into heaven, to be saved, to get blessings that are in heaven. Not at all, those were secured to him through faith in the Lord Jesus, but this prize of the upward calling corresponded to what? *"I fill up ... that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ ... for His body's sake, which is the church"* (Col. 1:24). I think that is the balance of things; the prize and — not what we must do in order to get to heaven and to get the blessings of heaven and of eternal life — but the prize because of that upon which our hearts were set, the satisfaction of the Lord's own heart in seeing the realization of what He had purposed, the expression of Himself.

Are we going the way of God's first best? Oh, God forbid that we should miss God's first best, should fail to set our heart upon that. The message is clear. He made a work upon the wheels, and the vessel that he made was marred; he made it again another vessel. We must ask the Lord, in a new act of abandonment to Him, that it may never be true of any one of us that we are another vessel than He intended, that we might have grace to be that which God intended. We must seek grace to go on through the difficulty, the adversity, the suffering entailed in God getting His first best and not draw back.

Here, then, is the message of the potter's house. God desires to express Himself; God can only begin to realise His eternal purpose as He is in possession of our lives; God can only proceed with His work as He has absolute acquiescence on our part. It is possible to miss the first best and only have the second best. The Lord write His word in our hearts!